

State's biggest volunteer cleanup scales back during pandemic

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The Northcoast Environmental Center's Coastal Cleanup Day has taken on a new look this year in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rather than organizing one, well-attended day of volunteers cleaning up trash from coastal areas, the NEC has left it up to local organizations to host smaller events throughout the month.

The Smith River Alliance, which has organized Del Norte's efforts over the last three years, is offering up a new way to take part in cleaning the community. Last year, 830 volunteers cleaned up about 6.96 tons of trash. This year, smaller groups are being organized to take cleanup efforts to extend beyond the coast and into the Smith River National Recreation Area, because all waterways eventually lead to the ocean, said cleanup organizer Tara Dettmar.

"Given the current circumstances, we decided gathering in a large group and organizing as we have in the past just wasn't safe for our volunteers or organizers. Instead, we want to make sure that folks are able to get

out in a way that is conducive to their schedules,” Dettmar said.

She said the week of Sept. 20-26 will focus on the coastal zone. Individuals and “quaran-teams” interested in cleaning up coastal areas should contact the Smith River Alliance to reserve a spot. Volunteers will sign up for a shift and a location will be assigned based on time and ability.

For more details or to reserve a spot, contact Dettmar at (904) 591-0901, email Tara@smithriveralliance.org or send a Facebook or Instagram message to the Smith River Alliance.

For those who would like to focus on cleaning up garbage before it gets to the coast, there will be opportunities to participate in cleanups around the National Recreation Area throughout the month of September.

For Dettmar, this year offers a unique opportunity to do more than just clean up, saying it’s also an opportunity to learn what a watershed is and how what we do all over the county affects our coastline.

“I would encourage people to think about how quickly the Smith River rises and falls in the rainy season and how trash travels in this county. It’s not stationary and that will help people understand the impact they can have no matter where they live,” Dettmar said.

She also extended her thanks to the organizers and lead funders for the 2020 Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Cleanup efforts.

The Northcoast Environmental Center has been hosting Coastal Cleanup Day for more than 30 years. Though the NEC was sponsoring beach cleanups starting in the late 70s, Coastal Cleanup Day is now a statewide event sponsored by the California Coastal Commission. Over 1.6 million volunteers have removed over 26 million pounds of trash statewide over the past three decades in what has become the largest and one of the longest running annual volunteer events in the state, according to the NEC. Last year alone, over 74,000 volunteers cleared more than 800,000 pounds of trash from shorelines and waterways.